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The world wants to ban children from social media, but there will be grave consequences for us all

Taylor Lorenz

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Age-verification systems require collecting sensitive data to support the biometric information. In no time, the internet will become a fully surveilled digital panopticon

Illustration: Nate Kitch/The Guardian

Over the past year, more than two dozen countries around the world have proposed bans on social media use for vast swathes of their public. These laws, often proposed under the guise of “child safety”, are ushering in an era of mass surveillance and widespread censorship, contributing to what scholars have called a “global free speech recession”.

Last year, Australia became the first country to ban anyone under the age of 16 from accessing social media. The move emboldened other countries around the world to quickly follow suit. Germany’s ruling party announced it was backing a social media ban. The French president, Emmanuel Macron, called for a ban on social media for under-15s. In the UK, Keir Starmer has sought to enact sweeping social media bans. Greece, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Japan have also pursued similar online identity verification laws.

In the US, online age verification laws have passed or are being considered in more than half of the nation’s states. In the coming weeks, a package of 19 “child safety” bills, several which require identity verification for social media, are set to move forward in the House of Representatives. Big tech platforms such as Meta, Google and Discord have begun pre-complying with the laws in order to get ahead of regulation.

While social media bans may seem like a prudent measure to protect children, they are not only ineffective, they endanger both children and adults. There is little evidence that social media is driving any type of widespread mental health crisis in children. Studies have repeatedly shown the opposite. Removing anonymity from the web, which will inevitably happen when tech companies are required to identify and ban children, allows for easier government tracking and censorship of journalists, activists and whistleblowers, who rely on online anonymity.

> I am a 15-year-old girl. Let me show you the vile misogyny that confronts me on social media every day
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And while some claim the laws would curb big tech’s power, only the largest tech companies have the resources to shoulder the extensive costs of age verification systems. Non-profit and indie platforms could be forced to close, consolidating big tech’s power further. Mass surveillance systems, once constructed, could also be easily leveraged by governments and bad actors.

If we want to fix the problems with social media, the place to start is through comprehensive data-privacy reform and consumer protections. Governments could also take action to break up big tech companies and prosecute them for anti-competitive behaviour. Lawmakers, who claim to care about children, could pass broader social and economic policies that we know would meaningfully improve children’s lives. Social media is a lifeline, especially for marginalised youth such as LGBTQ+ teens. Any policies that limit online access should centre on the most vulnerable children and adults.

To enact the social media bans being proposed around the world requires some system of age verification, which inherently means expanding surveillance technology. Because algorithmic systems cannot accurately estimate age, verifying a user’s age also requires collecting highly sensitive data or government documents to support the biometric data harvested. The laws being considered don’t all stipulate which system will be used, but there are significant privacy and safety concerns with all of them.

The core issue with “age verification” via technology is that it does not exist. Human beings do not age in a linear fashion. There is simply no physiological transformation that takes place on the night of your 16th or 18th birthday that would allow an AI to pinpoint your precise age, especially during puberty. Consequently, age verification systems that rely on harvesting biometric data must also require government IDs or other highly sensitive personal information in order to tie a user’s online profile to their offline identity and confirm their age.

This system not only allows big tech companies to harvest even more deeply personal data on children, but it creates massive cybersecurity risks. Data harvested by identity verification systems does not stay private. In October last year, Discord suffered a major breach of identity information collected by a contractor for age verification purposes. This week, researchers discovered that its age verification software has ties to investors linked with US government surveillance efforts.

Another insidious issue with these laws is the reactionary political movement that underlies them. In the US, groups that have played a pivotal role in lobbying for age verification include the Heritage Foundation, the rightwing thinktank that orchestrated Project 2025, and the National Center on Sexual Exploitation (NCOSE), formerly known as Morality in Media, a far-right activist organisation with religious fundamentalist ties that has fought for decades to restrict “obscene” content online.

Nor can the timing of these laws be separated from the broader crackdowns on free expression and protest under the Trump administration in the US. The TikTok ban was passed in the wake of student protests against the atrocities committed in Gaza. Student activists have played a crucial role in grassroots efforts to protect immigrants from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents seeking to haul them off to detention centres. Amid all of this, the US government has escalated attacks on anonymous speech online, flooding tech companies with subpoenas for information on hundreds of anonymously run anti-ICE social media accounts. While the situation is less dire in the UK, successive governments have been keen to crack down on protests, often involving young people, over the climate crisis and Gaza.

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Ari Cohn, the lead counsel for tech policy at the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (Fire), pointed out that the decision of Germany’s ruling Christian Democratic Union party to demand that the federal government institute age limitations for social media, comes directly on the heels of German police launching investigations of individuals who insulted Germany’s chancellor, Friedrich Merz, on Facebook.

“All lawmakers will claim that they are [enacting age verification] to protect youth from some harm, but they fail to mention the convenient power it hands to government to control and chill speech they oppose, and even punish their critics,” Cohn told me.

Instead of addressing the known causes of strife among young people, politicians around the world seem intent on leveraging their suffering to push laws that will strip both young and old alike of our rights. Protecting children from online harms is a noble goal, but bans relying on age verification laws are not the answer.

This could transform the internet from a space of free expression to a fully surveilled digital panopticon where every action you take online is tied to your government ID. Once built, this surveillance infrastructure will be abused, just as every prior expansion of government surveillance and censorship power has been. We must do everything in our power to stop these laws where we can and preserve a free and open internet.

Taylor Lorenz is a technology journalist who writes the newsletter User Mag and is the author of the bestselling book Extremely Online: The Untold Story of Fame, Influence, and Power on the Internet

At this dangerous time

We hope you appreciated this article. Before you close this tab, we want to ask if you could support the Guardian at this dangerous time for journalism in the US.

According to a leading global watchdog, American democracy is now more imperiled than at any point since the 1960s, marked by a precipitous decline in press freedom - driven by mounting pressure from the Trump administration in the form of threats, criminal investigations, politicized regulation, frivolous lawsuits and, for public media, catastrophic funding cuts.

Meanwhile, organizations that are supposed to be independent like the FBI and the FCC, our radio and television regulator, have also been targeting press freedom under Trump-aligned leadership, with the FBI raiding a reporter’s home and the FCC threatening ABC’s TV licenses after Jimmy Kimmel made a joke about Melania Trump.

The response from some ultra-wealthy and corporate media owners, keen to appease the president, has been chilling: CBS News has been taken over by a Trump ally; CNN is poised to be taken over by the same billionaire; Jeff Bezos has continued to impose cuts and editorial interventions at the Washington Post; and multiple outlets have settled multimillion-dollar lawsuits from the administration to protect their business interests.

Democracy is best served by a robust, thriving free press. But when that freedom is under attack, it falls to a determined few news organizations to ensure the full truth still reaches the public. Owned neither by a billionaire nor a corporation, the Guardian remains dedicated to covering this administration with uncompromising moral and factual clarity - and to keeping trustworthy journalism paywall-free for the world.

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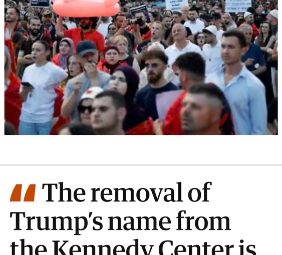

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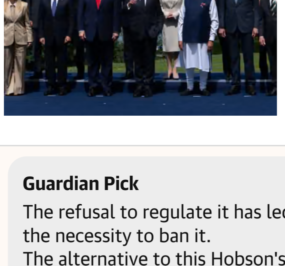

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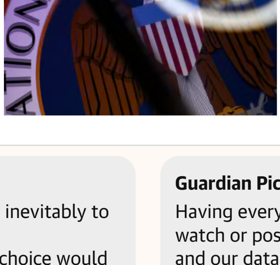

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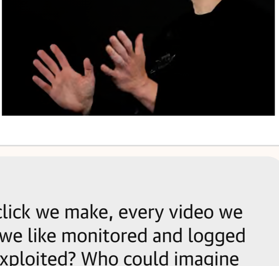

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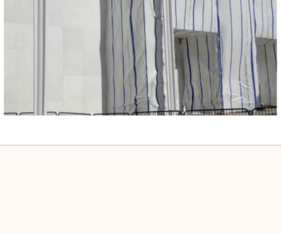

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Guardian Pick
The refusal to regulate it has led inevitably to the necessity to ban it.
The alternative to this Hobson's choice would have been governments with the integrity and decency to stand up for us using the law they have at their disposal, and the watchdogs that already exist.
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Guardian Pick
Having every click we make, every video we watch or post we like monitored and logged and our data exploited? Who could imagine such a thing. Thankfully it could never happen. /s
In a non facetious response, age restrictions and crackdown on the platforms themselves do not have to be mutually exclusive positions.

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